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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses factors affecting the achievement of gifted minority students, particularly Black students. Problems associated with underachievement definitions and the influence of social, cultural, and psychological factors on student achievement are examined. Suggestions and recommendations for reversing underachievement among gifted minority students are presented. Two tables are appended: a checklist for identifying indices of underachievement among gifted Black students, and strategies to enhance achievement among gifted minority students. (Contains 16 references.) (JDD)

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Underachievement Among Gifted Minority Students: Problems and Promises

Donna Y. Ford and Antoinette Thomas

The majority of articles and studies on gifted minority students have focused on issues of identification, primarily because some minority groups of gifted learners, particularly Black, Hispanic American, and Native American, have been underrepresented in gifted programs. These students may be underrepresented by as much as 30 to 70%, with an average of 50% (Ross, et al., 1993). While there is a clear need to increase the participation of minority students in gifted education programs, there is an equally important need to focus on issues of achievement and underachievement. This digest discusses factors affecting the achievement of gifted minority students, with particular attention to Black students. Problems associated with underachievement definitions and the influence of social, cultural, and psychological factors on student achievement are discussed. Suggestions and recommendations for reversing underachievement among gifted minority students are presented.

Defining Underachievement

There is little consensus on how best to define underachievement, particularly among gifted students. One problem rests in the definition of giftedness; another problem rests in measurement. For example, each district has its own definition of giftedness, although most rely almost exclusively on teacher recommendation, and an intelligence or achievement test score (Coleman, Gallagher, & Foster, 1994). A related issue concerns one's definition of underachievement. In general, underachievement is defined as a discrepancy between ability and performance. Yet, few studies have used the same definition of underachievement. After reviewing more than 100 publications on underachievement, Ford (1996) noted that this can be measured using any number of criteria and instruments. School A may use an intelligence and an achievement test, school B may use an achievement test and grade point average, and school C may use an aptitude test and GPA. In these examples, the schools have adopted a psychometric definition of underachievement, which is problematic because minority students tend not to score well on standardized tests.

Qualitative or subjective factors can also be used to identify underachievement. School D may rely on teacher expectations to determine who is underachieving. Thus, if a teacher believes that Marcus is not performing to his potential and that he can do better, Marcus would be considered an underachiever. Teachers must consider several questions regarding the nature and extent of students' underachievement: (a) Is underachievement chronic, situational, or temporary? (b) Is underachievement subject specific or general? and (c) What factors are contributing to underachievement (e.g., poor intrinsic motivation, poor academic self-esteem, negative peer pressures, lack of family involvement, poor student-teacher relationships, low teacher expectations)?

The lack of consensus on how best to define and measure underachievement—qualitative or quantitative, amount of discrepancy, nature and extent—all make it difficult to estimate the number of gifted students who are underachieving. Whitmore (1980) estimated that at least 20% of gifted students underachieve, while the U.S. Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) estimated 50%. Ford (1996) found that 46% of the gifted Black students surveyed were underachieving.

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Factors Affecting Underachievement

A number of factors must be examined to understand how and why gifted minority students underachieve. Sociopsychological, family, and school factors should all be considered. Table 1 presents an initial checklist that can be used to explore factors contributing to underachievement.

Sociopsychological Factors and Underachievement

Poor self-esteem and low academic and social self-concepts contribute significantly to poor student achievement. Ford, Harris, and Schuerger (1993) maintained that racial identity must also be explored with gifted minority students. How do these students feel about their racial/ethnic heritage? Do they have a strong, positive racial identity? Minority students who do not hold positive racial identities may be especially vulnerable to negative peer pressures; they may also equate achievement with "acting white" or "selling out" (Fordham, 1988), which contributes to low effort and, thus, low achievement. Specifically, Lindstrom and Van Sant (1986) reported that many gifted minority students must choose between need for achievement and need for affiliation. These students often succumb to negative social pressures so that need for affiliation outweighs need for achievement.

An external locus of control also hinders minority students' achievement. Students who attribute their outcomes to external factors, such as discrimination, may put forth less effort than those who attribute outcomes to internal factors, such as effort and ability (Ford, 1996; Fordham, 1988). Minority students who do not believe in the achievement ideology, who believe that glass ceilings and injustices will hinder their achievement, are not likely to work to their potential in school.

Family-Related Factors and Underachievement

Few studies have explored the influence of family variables on the achievement of gifted minority students. VanTassel-Baska (1989) focused on the role of families in the lives of 15 low socioeconomic status (SES) gifted students, eight of whom were Black, and many living in single-parent families. Her findings reveal that low SES Black families held high expectations, aspirations, and standards for their children, as well as positive achievement orientations. The Black parents sought to promote self-competence and independence in their children. Parents were described as watchful of their children, hyperaware of children's accomplishments, and actively involved in developing their abilities.

Prom-Jackson, Johnson, and Wallace (1987) conducted a study of minority graduates of A Better Chance, Inc. (ABC), a nonprofit educational organization that identifies academically gifted low SES minority students as possible candidates for college preparatory secondary schools. It was concluded that low SES gifted minority students had parents of all educational levels. Parental educational level was not a good predictor of minority students' academic performance. The findings on parental beliefs and values suggested that in spite of social hardships and barriers, which often limit achievement and social advancement, this group of parents must have had high expectations of their children in order to have encouraged them to pursue high levels of education and challenging careers.

In a seminal study, Clark (1983) examined low SES Black students' achievement and underachievement in their family context. Achieving Black students had parents who (a) were assertive in their parent involvement efforts; (b) kept abreast of their children's school

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progress; (c) were optimistic and tended to perceive themselves as having effective coping mechanisms and strategies; (d) set high and realistic expectations for their children; (e) held positive achievement orientations and supported tenets of the achievement ideology; (f) set clear, explicit achievement-oriented norms; (g) established clear, specific role boundaries; (h) deliberately engaged in experiences and behaviors designed to promote achievement; and (i) had positive parent-child relations characterized by nurturance, support, respect, trust, and open communication. Conversely, underachieving Black students had parents who (a) were less optimistic and expressed feelings of helplessness and hopelessness; (b) were less assertive and involved in their children's education; (c) set unrealistic and unclear expectations for their children; and (d) were less confident in terms of their parenting skills. Ford (1993) also found that gifted Black achievers reported more positive values and expectations among their parents regarding their participation in the gifted program, doing well, and exerting effort.

School-Related Factors and Underachievement

Numerous factors in schools can influence the achievement of gifted minority students. For example, in a study of gifted Black achievers and underachievers (Ford, 1995), underachievers reported (a) less positive teacher-student relations, (b) having too little time to understand the material, (c) a less supportive classroom climate, and (d) being unmotivated and disinterested in school. Underachievers also expressed more concerns regarding the lack of attention to multicultural education in their classes, which contributed to their lack of interest in school.

Numerous studies indicate that teacher expectations have a powerful impact on student achievement (e.g., Good, 1981). Using teachers to define underachievement presents some problems if teachers lack objectivity or training in gifted education and multicultural education. Teachers tend to have lower expectations for minority and low income students than for other students (Hale-Benson, 1986). Consequently, minority students may not be identified as either gifted or underachieving. Low teacher expectations for minority students may relate to a lack of teacher training in both multicultural and gifted education. Such unprepared teachers are less likely to refer minority students for gifted education services or to complete checklists favorably. When students do not have access to appropriate education, they have difficulty reaching their potential. The result may be underachievement due to disinterest, frustration, and lack of challenge.

Some researchers have noted how minority students' learning styles may contribute to underachievement. Specifically, research indicates that Black students tend to be field-dependent, visual, and concrete learners (Hale-Benson, 1986), whereas schools teach more often in verbal, abstract, and decontextualized ways. Thus, mismatch between learning styles and teaching styles can result in confusion, frustration, and underachievement for gifted minority students.

Excessive use of competition can also hinder students' achievement, damaging academic motivation and educational engagement. Given the more social and less competitive nature of minority students (e.g., Hale-Benson, 1986), competition can heighten students' anxieties, lower their achievement motivation, and lower their academic and social self-concepts.

Suggestions for Preventing and Reversing Underachievement

Student underachievement is a complex and persistent problem. Reversing underachievement among gifted minority students requires intensive efforts on the part of teachers and counselors, as well as a partnership with parents and students. For optimal effects, teachers and counselors must tailor interventions to students' needs. Interventions for gifted minority students must consider social-psychological, family, peer, and school factors. Interventions must (a) ensure that definitions of underachievement are both qualitative and quantitative, and that measures are valid and reliable; (b) enhance self-perceptions—self-esteem, self-concept (academic and social), and racial identity; (c) improve students' skills in studying, time management, organization, and taking tests; (d) involve family members as partners in the educational process; and (e) address school-related factors, including providing teachers and counselors with gifted and multicultural training to meet both the academic and affective needs of gifted minority students. This training should include strategies for improving student-teacher relations, teacher expectations, and the classroom climate. Just as important, school-related interventions must focus on curricular and instructional modifications so that optimal learning and engagement are possible.

To prevent or reverse underachievement, schools will need to provide supportive strategies, intrinsic strategies, and remedial strategies. The strategies include accommodations to students' learning styles, focusing on students' interests, and affirming students as individuals with special needs and concerns. Suggested strategies appear in Table 2.

Summary

One of the biggest problems facing educators is that of student underachievement. Teachers and parents feel confusion, frustration, and disappointment when students fail to work to their potential. Gifted underachieving minority students perform poorly in school for many of the reasons that any student might. Yet, as described earlier, minority students may face additional barriers.

In short, underachievement is not only a problem, but a symptom of problems. To address this, educators must explore factors contributing to underachievement; these factors can be categorized as sociopsychological, family-related, peer-related, and school-related. One or all of these factors can hinder student achievement. Teachers, counselors, and families must join in partnerships to best identify and serve gifted underachieving minority students.

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Table 1: Checklist for Identifying Indices of Underachievement Among Gifted Black Students

Social Factors

____ Student's primary social group is outside of the school or gifted program
____ Student participates in little or no extracurricular activities
____ Student socializes with delinquents and/or students who have a poor achievement orientation
____ Student's need for peer acceptance and relations outweighs his or her academic concerns about school and achievement
____ Student lives in one or more risk factors (e.g., poverty, single-parent family, poorly educated parent(s), etc.)

Family Factors

____ Student's home life is stressful
____ Low parental educational level
____ Student has one parent in the home
____ Student has relatives who have dropped out of school
____ Student has little parental/family supervision; poor family relations
____ Parental expectations for student are too low or unrealistic
____ Low socioeconomic status
____ Communication between home and school is poor

School Culture/Climate Factors

____ Teachers and school personnel hold low expectations of minority students
____ Morale among teachers, school personnel, and/or students is low
____ Classroom environment is unfriendly or hostile
____ Student feels alienated and isolated from teacher(s)
____ Student feels alienated and isolated from classmates
____ Gifted program lacks cultural and racial diversity relative to students
____ Teaching, administrative staff, and other school personnel lack racial and cultural diversity
____ Little attention is given to multicultural education
____ Teachers and other school personnel lack substantive training in gifted education
____ Teachers and other school personnel lack substantive training in multicultural and urban education
____ Minority students are underrepresented in the gifted program and services

Psychological/Individual Factors

____ Student motivation is consistently low
____ Student has negative attitude toward school
____ Student cannot tolerate structured and/or passive activities
____ Student relates poorly to authority or adult figures (e.g., teachers, parents, administrators)
____ Student has experienced emotional trauma (on more than one occasion, consistently, or frequently)
____ Student has low self-esteem
____ Student has low academic and/or social self-concepts
____ Student has poor racial identity
____ Student has health or medical problems
____ Student attributes failure to lack of ability; attributes success to luck or easy task
____ Student consistently seeks immediate gratification
____ Student's learning style preferences are inconsistent with teaching styles
____ Student suffers from test or evaluative anxiety
____ Student has a learning disability

Student Achievement Behaviors

____ Student has low standardized test scores
____ Student has low grades or grade point average
____ Student exerts little effort on school tasks
____ Student avoids challenging work
____ Student bores easily; dislikes drill work and rote practices
____ Student disrupts the classroom
____ Student procrastinates on school assignments
____ Student has poor study and/or test-taking skills
____ Student resists participating in gifted program and services
____ Student has been suspended and/or expelled
____ Student has been truant or does not go to classes

Note. From *Reversing Underachievement Among Gifted Black Students: Promising Practices and Programs* by D. Y. Ford, 1996. New York: Teachers College Press. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Table 2: Strategies to Enhance Achievement Among Gifted Minority Students

Strategy	Goal/Objective	Recommended Strategies
Supportive Strategies	To affirm the self-worth of students and convey the promise of greater potential and success; to provide social and emotional support	Provide opportunities for students to discuss concerns with teachers and counselors; Address issues of motivation, self-perception, and self-efficacy; Accommodate learning styles; Modify teaching styles (e.g., abstract, concrete, visual, auditory); Use mastery learning; Decrease competitive, norm-referenced environments; Use cooperative learning and group work; Use positive reinforcement and praise; Seek affective and student-centered classrooms; Set high expectations of students; Use multicultural education and counseling techniques and strategies; Involve mentors and role models; Involve family members in substantive ways
Intrinsic strategies	To help students develop internal motivation; to increase academic engagement and self-efficacy	Provide constructive and consistent feedback; Give choices, focus on interests; Vary teaching styles to accommodate learning styles; Provide for active and experiential learning (e.g., role plays, simulations, case studies, projects, internships); Use bibliotherapy and biographies; Use mentorships and role models; Adopt an education that is multicultural – culturally relevant and personally meaningful, an education that provides insight and self-understanding; Have nurturing, affirming classrooms
Remedial strategies	To improve students' academic performance in the specific area(s) of difficulty	Implement academic counseling (e.g., tutoring, study skills, test-taking skills); Teach time management and organization; Use individual and small group instruction; Use learning contracts, learning journals

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